

Charleston Spill Response

Question: What is EPA's role in the spill response?

Answer:

- EPA dispatched two On Scene Coordinators to assist the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (WVDEP), the lead agency for responding to the incident. EPA assisted in developing air and water monitoring strategies, including an appropriate sampling protocol for 4-methylcyclohexane methanol (MCHM) so sampling could start as soon as possible. EPA Region 3 personnel also staffed the FEMA response center in Philadelphia through the first weekend of the incident on a 24 hours basis.
- EPA's Central Regional Lab (CRL) identified analytical techniques for the single compound MCHM in water, striving to lower analytical detection limits for the compound and attempting to ensure the reliability of analytical methods employed by public utilities and other organizations. CRL subsequently identified the appropriate analytical methods for identifying PPH in water and attempted to attain acceptable detection limits for making public health evaluations.
- EPA has consulted with the WV Bureau for Public Health on an ongoing basis, providing technical advice on several matters, including flushing and sampling plans, water treatment, contaminant chemistry, and considerations for a residential sampling study.

Background:

- On Thursday, January 9, EPA received notice of a chemical spill from Freedom Industries in Charleston, WV into the Elk River. The spilled chemical was MCHM, which is used in coal preparation and processing. The governor of WV declared a state of emergency for nine counties. The Kanawha Valley Water Treatment Plant detected the MCHM and, while the substance is not a toxic or otherwise regulated substance, issued an order to not drink, cook, or bathe in the water to approximately 100,000 customers or 300,000 people in a nine county area.
- On January 10, WVDEP ordered the facility to cease operations, cleanup the MCHM, empty all storage tanks, and dismantle the tanks. WVDEP also issued notices of violation from their Air and Water Permitting programs.
- On January 21, Freedom Industries informed the WVDEP, the West Virginia American Water Company, and EPA that another chemical, polyglycol ether (PPH) was also a constituent of the release that occurred on January 9, 2014. EPA shared this information with the Chemical Safety Board (CSB) and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). ATSDR stated that the health risk level for PPH is 1.2 ppm, however, the level of PPH detected was below that risk level.
- CSB and the FBI continue to investigate the Site. The facility has hired a contractor to develop a long term remediation plan to find and remove any residual contamination.
- Water sampling continues at the West Virginia American plant; reported concentrations of MCHM in raw (intake) and treated water continue to be below the detectable limit (10 ppb).